

Women in A World of Men: Female Representation in *Narcos* and the Illusion of “Universal” Serial Fiction

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Abstract: *This article analyzes the treatment of female characters in a contemporary narco-narrative, the third season of Narcos. Our research problem is to understand female representation in highly consumed products which, under a seemingly “neutral”, international, professional aesthetic, directed at a wide spectrum of “demanding” consumers, mainly give visibility to male characters. We use a case study to understand how, under the guise of universality, serial fiction maintains female underrepresentation.*

Keywords: *Narco-narratives; female representation; Latin-American women.*

Mulheres em um mundo de homens: representação feminina em *Narcos* e a ilusão da ficção seriada “universal”

Resumo: Neste artigo temos como objetivo analisar o tratamento conferido a personagens femininas em uma narco-narrativa contemporânea, a terceira temporada de Narcos. Nosso problema de investigação é a compreensão das representações femininas em produtos altamente consumidos e que, sob uma estética aparentemente “neutra”, internacional, profissional, dirigida a um amplo espectro de consumidores “exigentes”, da visibilidade, sobretudo a uma parcela masculina da sociedade. Pretendemos entender, portanto, a partir de um estudo de caso, de que modo, sob a aparência da universalidade, a ficção seriada corrobora a manutenção da sub-representação feminina.

Palavras-chave: *Narconarrativas; representação feminina; mulheres latino-americanas.*

Fictional series have occupied an important place in contemporary audiovisual productions, in terms of both the reception of critics and the public they have reached. While Netflix has become consolidated as a producer and distributor of streaming content, traditional cable television broadcasters such as HBO have modernized their applications for mobile devices, while new players, such as Amazon, have entered the market. In the traditional media, the coverage of cinema has inevitably given space to reviews of new series and seasons, while an entire sector of criticism has come to be dominated by *Youtubers* and users of Twitter who exhibit what we can consider to be an erudition applied to mass culture, watching a chapter many times and analyzing its formal aspects.

In recent years, we can note that series with female (and feminist) themes have created great enthusiasm among spectators, such as *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017-) and *Big Little Lies* (2017-2019). Series in traditionally male genres, such as westerns, fantasy or science fiction, such as *Godless* (2017), *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) and *Westworld* (2016-), have developed strong female characters, culminating in a war among queens in the second example and in a rebellion led by women in the third. From the perspective of production, women have gained more space on production staffs, beyond the traditional functions of costume design, and act as directors and showrunners, as have Lisa Joy, who shares with Jonathan Nolan the production of *Westworld*, and Shonda Rhimes, who is responsible for *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005-) and *How to Get away with Murder* (2014-). Like much of the entertainment industry, however, the segment is dominated by men.

ReFrame, a US organization that evaluates gender diversity in film and television, found that in 2018 only two in ten series analyzed include a significant number of women among their characters and production staff. The universe of the TV series is constituted as an important symbolic, political and cultural space in the contemporary world, which has yet to be occupied by women, although we can glimpse some recent changes, conquered thanks to the efforts of artists and activists.

As important as it is to quantify and qualify the participation of women in contemporary audiovisual entertainment, it is also important to understand how an ideology is constructed that strives to characterize series as products opposed to old narrative televised formulas, which are considered less sophisticated. In his book, *Difficult Men*, for example, Brett Martin (2014) analyzes the recent impact of contemporary series, creating a theoretical narrative that gives total protagonism to men, whether as characters, actors or showrunners. The work seems to gain pleasure in dealing with the complicated, extravagant and unpredictable personalities of the men involved in the TV series market. As is customary in patriarchal society, the extravagances of actors and showrunners, when associated to the male sex, are seen as a type of special undeniable charm linked to talent. These characteristics are transferred to the characters in the series, whose success is attributed to their idiosyncrasies. One man interviewed in the book tells what he learned about the heroes of the series: “[the hero] can do a lot of bad things, can make all kinds of mistakes, can be lazy and seem like an idiot, as long as he is smarter than everyone and does his job well” (apud MARTIN, 2014, p. 63). We can ask if a heroine would benefit from the same indulgence or would be classified as a whore, an opportunist or hysterical.

The subtitle of the book – *Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From the Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad* makes clear that the male series, with characters and production teams formed above all by men, and with male themes, are those considered as exemplary of that revolution. And what was that revolution? According to Martin, since the mid 1980s,

Instead of aiming to attract one-third of all viewers (which was becoming increasingly impossible in any event), networks now targeted specific demographics—rich, young, educated, male, and so on. The fragmentation of the American audience had begun. And, as it would again twenty years later, that meant good things for quality TV. (MARTIN, 2013, p. 36).¹

The expression “quality TV” used by Martin (2014) in the book, and which is also common among researchers in the field, implicitly brings the idea that TV tends to not be considered quality entertainment. Thus, a qualifier must be added, that “of quality”, to the noun that designates the media. It should be recalled that one of the first slogans of HBO was: “It’s not TV. It’s HBO”, as a way of symbolically distancing itself from a media considered to be inferior. But why is TV considered entertainment for undemanding people?

In recent decades, various studies have revealed that much of the prejudice in relation to TV comes from its identification with female narrative genres, such as melodrama, found particularly in telenovelas. Heloisa Buarque de Almeida (2002) reflects on this issue through what she called “feminization of the telenovela”. According to Almeida, for a long time the association between women and telenovelas was not questioned. “Women would have special pleasure in watching the novelas because they spoke of stories of love and family, of romantic and family conflicts, of happy endings, with kisses, marriage and if possible, children” (ALMEIDA, 2002, p. 173). She explained that the association between the telenovela and the female universe is a consequence of another association, which “approximates the feminine to the family and domestic world” (2002, p. 174), an association that remains despite the presence of women in public space and in the labor market.

According to Esther Hamburger (2007, p. 155), the association between the female gender and telenovelas is part of a larger phenomenon, which identifies mass culture to the female universe. For Patrice Petro (1986, p. 6), the discussion about mass culture is almost always accompanied by gender metaphors that associate female values to mass culture and male values to true art, creating an opposition between distraction and attention, passivity and activity, and so on (PETRO, 1986, p. 6). This association motivates a series of presumptions in relation to the taste and the cultural repertoire of women, given that, whether from the leftist perspective of Adorno and Horkheimer or from the right-wing perspective of Ortega y Gasset, mass culture is considered to lack originality, to be aesthetically conservative, and aimed at an undemanding public that rejects intellectual effort. In the leftist version of the criticism, mass culture is considered to have the ideological function of maintenance of order and alienation of workers.

Thus, the “revolution” of which Martin (2014) speaks is related to a transformation of television series, from eminently feminine products to male products, such as the series mentioned, *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013) and *Mad Men* (2007-2015), which although they often deal with traditionally female themes, such as family, do so from a male angle, or, as Teresa de Lauretis (1987) said, are aimed at male viewers. In this process, the series take a symbolic distance

¹ Retrieved from original version of the book.

from the characteristics usually attributed to mass culture – associated to the female universe – and come to be analyzed as elements of erudition, so that their critics come to minutely analyze not only the scripts, but also formal aspects such as editing, photography and art direction. The argument developed in Martin's book constructs an association between the rise of television with good taste and products aimed at a male public, operating a division between television that was made until the early 1990s – melodramatic and convoluted telenovelas – to TV that is made today – with supposedly well-constructed characters afflicted with moral ambiguity. The critical change in status and reception of the traditional Latin American telenovela for the current international series reflects an observation of Pierre Bourdieu (2002) about what took place with female domestic activities when they come to be realized by men.

[...] the same tasks may be noble and difficult, when performed by men, or insignificant and imperceptible, easy and futile, when performed by women. As is seen in the difference between the chef and the cook, the couturier and the seamstress, a reputedly female task only has to be taken over by a man and performed outside the private sphere in order for it to be thereby ennobled and transfigured [...] (BOURDIEU, 2002, p. 60).

The efficiency of this process is truly incredible. It symbolically transforms a genre considered to be obtuse entertainment into a product of quality. We do not want to deny that aesthetic changes and those of language exist, but what is interesting to note is how the idea is constructed of a break between those series produced until the late 1980s and those of today. This process can be verified, for example, if we examine genres and themes previously considered excessively male and aesthetically inferior and that have now been reconstructed with an appearance suitable to demanding, broad, international viewers, and that for this reason appear to speak to all publics, regardless of gender or race.

This is the case of some narco-narratives that have had recent success, and which transform shows with the theme of violence and drugs in Latin America into products suitable to a contemporary international public. We are thinking, above all, of the first three seasons of *Narcos* (2015, 2016 and 2017), a Netflix production that dramatizes events involving the fight against the large Colombian drug cartels. This product is different from most of the narco-telenovelas traditionally produced for Latin American television, which present sordid situations and environments, acting considered exaggerated, extravagant costumes and make-up, and soundtracks of *narcocorridos*². To exemplify this comparison, we can cite other products available on Netflix itself such as *El Capo – El Amo Del Túnel* (2016), a Mexican series remotely based on Joaquín Guzmán; *Estocolmo* (2016), an Argentine series about human trafficking that explores violence and sexuality; and *La Reina Del Sur* (2011), a Mexican telenovela produced by Telemundo based on the book with the same name by Spanish author Arturo Pérez-Reverte, published in 2002.

These series (even *La Reina Del Sur* in its first version with Kate del Castillo) were clearly aimed at male viewers, exploiting formulas for *cis* men, with scenes that voyeuristically show female bodies and brutal violence among highly impulsive men with little schooling. *Narcos*, in contrast, sought to dissimulate to a certain degree the fact that it is speaking to male viewers, wrapping scenes of sex and violence in motivations of the storyline, as well as editing and art direction carefully led by film professionals. Thus, the separation between traditional TV and "quality TV" is formally and symbolically produced: this is not a crude product, aimed at the less sophisticated Latin American male, but entertainment on an "artistic" level that appeals to various contemporary publics that normally do not consume narco-narratives. In this way, even if the series is not specifically aimed at female publics, it apparently does not offend them, and includes elements that allow the identification of female spectators with the narrative presented. It largely disguises the profoundly male nature of this product, wrapping it with a pleasant aesthetic and suppressing the obvious lowbrow violence, typical of mass culture aimed at men.

In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2015) sketch a theory about ideology that would deeply influence human and social sciences and provide an efficient explanation for the identification that many of the oppressed feel for the ideas of the oppressors. Even if in the sociology of art the concept that there is an economic determination over the superstructure cannot be accepted without mediations, the idea that a given order is maintained by the fact that the ideas of the dominant appear as universal ideas is very powerful. Thus, adapting the concept to our subject, it is possible to argue that a product such as *Narcos* acts in a much more complex and disturbing manner than an openly hetero-male series, precisely because it allows some identification of the female public with the events and characters portrayed. By presenting itself as part of a universal aesthetic, suitable to the entertainment of contemporary good taste, *Narcos* largely hides the fact that its ideal viewer is male, thus naturalizing the under representation of the female gender under an elegant aesthetic and well-constructed script while it makes the male characters the main drivers of the action and narrative.

² A subgenre of the "corrido", a musical rhythm typically produced on the Mexican US border.

This mechanism of ideological transformation of the particular into the universal makes it difficult for us to define what would be a "female writing" or "female aesthetic". In *Technologies of Gender*, Lauretis (1987) addresses this issue. According to Lauretis, the difficulty has two main reasons: firstly, it is related to a dual challenge of the feminist movement, which must offer proposals and be politically affirmative, but that must simultaneously undertake a radical criticism of patriarchal society that engenders the current political discourse. That is, the movement must challenge, while simultaneously participating in this political space, because there is no other form of transforming it. The second reason is related to the question of language and is related to the difficulty of having to act as subjects in a structure of discourse which "negates or objectifies us through their representations" (LAURETIS, 1987, p. 127). That is, language (which we can understand in the context of the work mentioned as also being the language of film, for example), as a structuring element of social classifications and relations, establishes a social and symbolic place for women that we must confront, given the lack of any other medium, through language itself.

Lauretis quotes Laura Mulvey in her effort to consider what would be a feminist cinema. At first, she thought of transforming the content of cinematographic representation (that is, that which was said by cinema). In a second moment her concern was with the language of representation (the form that it was said, therefore). Mulvey defends the destruction of narrative cinema and of visual pleasure as a form of de-objectifying the image of women, and as an alternative focusing on feminist counter cinema (LAURETIS, 1987, p. 128). For Lauretis, however, this does not respond precisely to the question of what would be "female writing", and identifies a complementary problem: is there truly a single female aesthetic language, or would this disguise differences among women – racialized women, lesbians, women who use a veil, working class women etc.? Given the difficulties of recognizing a single form of "female writing" Lauretis defends the idea that we think of a cinema that "address the spectator as female, rather than portray women positively or negatively" (LAURETIS, 1987, p. 135).

By refusing the narrative spectacle of cinema and audiovisual production, what the contemporary series explores very well by articulating the pleasure of reading the *feuilleton* [serialized fiction traditionally found in European newspapers] to beautiful images, the proposal by Mulvey as cited by Lauretis appears to reject all forms of entertainment. The essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* was written in 1975, a time when the Critical Theory of Adorno and Horkheimer and its criticism of the cultural industry enjoyed considerable prestige in studies of mass culture. It was a context theoretically propitious to arguments that analyzed cinema as a factor in the maintenance of order, whether capitalist or patriarchal. In addition, the theoretical tools used by Mulvey were based on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, which we know to be highly phallogocentric. Thinking in the current situation, particularly in the moment when TV series have become highly consumed and valued products – including by critics – Mulvey's proposal raises a problem for those who, like us, are interested in the symbolic constructions that are effectively being consumed by the public and that, therefore, have a strong power to disseminate representations. It would be necessary to reflect on a form of resistance to the patriarchy which, at the interior of the mass culture, is consumed by a large number of viewers and simultaneously offers alternative possibilities for identification and subjectivation.

The concept of the series nearly clashes with the proposal of a vanguard audiovisual production. Modern series, which include telenovelas, have their origin in the *feuilleton*, the main objective of which was to tell a good story so that readers would buy the newspapers every day. The genre had to appeal to the reader's desire to accompany the story and its characters in their fantastic or *rocambolésque* adventures – an expression that originated from the most famous French *feuilleton* character, Rocambole. Similarly, activities in many Latin American countries still stop to accompany the final chapters of a telenovela and fans worldwide avidly await the launching of a new season of a TV show.

Vincent Colonna (2015), in *L'Art de Séries Télé* (2015), affirms that series are characterized, firstly by narrative, by plot, by a well told story. He maintains that this is what makes US television series successful, and this is what European producers took so long to realize, since they were stuck to a vanguard European film tradition that had form as its main quality:

The notion of originality does not make sense in television, unlike cinema; and the characters cannot be the foundation of a series, because they do not resist the repetition of the episodes [...]. When Hollywood producer David O. Selznick said that a good film is based on three things: *a good story, a good story and once again a good story*, it was not a good definition of film, but above all of a TV series (COLONNA, 2015, p. 23, translation ours).³

³ "La notion d'originalité n'a pas de sens en télévision, à la différence du cinéma; et les personnages ne peuvent être au fondement d'une série, car ils ne résisteraient pas à l'usure qu'entraîne la répétition des épisodes [...]. Quand le producteur hollywoodien David O. Selznick disait qu'un bon film reposait sur trois choses: une bonne histoire, une bonne histoire et encore une bonne histoire, ce n'était pas une bonne définition du cinéma, mais plutôt de série télé."

Thus, our challenge, our research problem, consists in analyzing how mass produced and consumed products follow an apparently “neutral”, international, professional, aesthetic in contrast to the telenovela, and aimed at a broad spectrum of “demanding” consumers, underrepresent the female contribution in Latin American society and construct a world view aimed above all at a male public. The question that is raised is in what way series with a traditionally male theme – drug dealing – appear to be aimed at a broader and less sexist public, but wind up reinforcing the traditional social stereotypes, perhaps in a way that is more misogynous than a telenovela (which as we saw, tend to be seen as a product inferior to traditional TV).

For this reason, we chose to address here the female representation in one of the seasons of the series *Narcos* (2017), which has on its staff internationally recognized professionals who have worked in film, such as José Padilha (who is one of the executive producers of the season) and the actor Javier Cámara. We will look at the third season, which does not have Pablo Escobar as a character, but focuses on the narco-traffickers of the Cali Cartel. Without Pablo Escobar, the series lost an important male character, one who was extremely hetero-oriented, an “authentic” Latin American macho who loves his family while relating with lovers and prostitutes. It is perhaps the season of *Narcos*, including *Narcos Mexico*, that presents a less stereotyped Latin American masculinity, because the drug dealers in question initially present themselves as less violent and more refined men, and therefore it is perhaps the season that presents itself as more “universal”, with more nuanced male models. Above all, the series constructs a representation of Latin American women, but also of *gringa* women inserted in a Latin American context. This is a quite specific group, considering that the influence of patriarchal institutions and values on Latin American women continues to be highly perceptible, in professional and domestic environments, in political participation, in reproductive rights, in government assistance, and in the representation at the interior of mass culture, as highlighted in the example of *Narcos*.

It is possible to affirm that the place occupied by women in these audiovisual products corresponds to the place occupied by women in the “real” universes of drug dealers. That is, there would be a correspondence between the fiction and the “real” on which it is inspired. Even if *Narcos* draws on real facts, we see these series as socio-imagetic fictional constructions aimed at broad audiences, and that create a certain world view about Latin American women who are linked to drug dealers, and not as forms of access that are not mediated to their reality. Our concept of representation, in this sense, approximates that of social representation as analyzed by Denise Jodelet (2017) through studies of Serge Moscovici, that is, as a modality of knowledge about the world which has practical effectiveness, which composes the daily experience of individuals and social groups and that is characterized as a mixture between the “real” and “ideal”, residing between the concrete nature of social phenomena and their ideation (JODELET, 2017, p. 26-43). The image created from social representation is not confused here either with the illusory (or ideology), or with a form of access to the unconscious of the artist, or with creative-aesthetic attitudes that can be analyzed in and of themselves, but as a form of knowledge about the world that, at the same time in which it is created by the collectivity, influences this collectivity. In this way, as products of mass market and popular fiction, these series help to construct a representation of women that comes to potentially have “real” practical effect, symbolically legitimating certain attitudes in relation to women and to the female body that are already diffused in society. It should be considered that between the “real” and its representation there is not exactly a separation, because material life is not conceivable without its symbolization: “All representation presupposes the existence of the real, but this real only comes to the conscience to the degree to which a representation affirms it and allows its description” (Hans BELTING, 2007, p. 38, translation ours).⁴

The female representation in the universe of narco-trafficking is a current and relevant theme, to the degree that narco-culture became popular not only in its original environment, but also in the internationalized mass culture. In other words, narco-culture, to use the terms of Renato Ortiz (1994), became internationally popular, and was uprooted from its place of origin. Thus, it is necessary to consider not only the social aspects of representation, which according to Jodelet (1991, p. 41) are articulated to the affective and mental elements that integrate cognition, but also the specific way by which these representations are communicated: “social communication, under interindividual, institutional and media aspects, appear as a condition of possibility and of determination of representations and of social thinking” (JODELET, 1991, p. 47, translation ours).⁵ Popular-international mass culture became an important form of systematizing and communicating representations. However, in addition to their local uprooting and deep interconnection with globalized society, TV series utilize the prerogatives of the moving image, ontologically linked to the “real”, as theorized in a fundamental manner by André Bazin (2002) and Belting (2007) and discussed by Paulo Menezes (2000) and Marina S. Jorge (2013): representation in cinematographic type images, by the nature of

⁴ “Toute représentation présuppose l’existence du réel, mais ce réel n’advient à la conscience que dans la mesure où une représentation l’affirme et le rend descriptible.”

⁵ “Ainsi la communication sociale, sous ses aspects interindividuels, institutionnels et médiatiques apparaît-elle comme condition de possibilité et de détermination des représentations et de la pensée sociales.”

its mechanical production process (Bazin) and by the identity between image and veracity produced at the interior of Christianity (Belting), carries within it the appearance of speaking about the real in a direct and minimally mediated way. In sum, *Narcos* expresses and imagetically communicates social representations about men and women linked to narcotrafficking while it simultaneously produces these representations in the collectivity, and does so through a visual medium that carries both ontologically and culturally a strong impression of reality (and therefore of convincing).

Narcos has very few women on its production staff. Action genres are traditionally considered male territories, and only more recently have we seen more female directors and screenwriters working in this field. No woman director has a credit in *Narcos*, in this season or the previous ones. There are only two women screenwriters in the credits in this season, Ashley Lyle, in episode 5, called *MRO*, and Santa Sierra, in episode 7, *Sin Salida*. Thus, even backstage the series is a male space. In this sense, although it is not a series with a theme considered to be feminine, because it has women characters, it can be said that it has representations of the subalternized according to the voice of the dominant. Citing the important text of Gayatri C. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, Eduardo Rabenhorst and Raquel Carmargo (2013) affirm: "submarginalized groups are always intermeditated by the voice of the other, that is, by those who have the power to represent and describe, and who thus control how those who do not have identical power are seen" (RABENHORST; CARMARGO, 2013, p. 992).

Structural anthropology shows us that it is necessary to understand society in a relational form, therefore, it is not enough to understand the image of women in a chosen work, but to insert it in an inter-relational system of gender representations. Thus, we also briefly address male characters and masculinities, given that the representation of men and women is mutually constructed: "Masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition." (Robert CONNELL, 2005, p. 43). Our perspective of masculinity thus approximates that expressed and analyzed by R. W. Connell: "Masculinities are configurations of practices structured by gender relations. They are inherently historical; and their making and remaking is a political process affecting the balance of interests in society and the direction of social change" (CONNELL, 2005, p. 44).

Many authors, such as Benedito Medrado and Jorge Lyra (2008), Miriam Grossi (2004) and Nelson Martini (2002), consider and demonstrate, some with empiric studies, that there is not only one masculinity, but various masculinities, which "at times follow each other, and at times coexist" (MARTINI, 2002, p. 22). Grossi cites studies in Brazil that indicate "multiple models of masculinity", such as "honored men, sensitive men, new fathers, unemployed men etc." (GROSSI, 2004, p. 28). For the theme of this study, it is particularly interesting to reflect, with help from Grossi, on aggressivity as a characteristic traditionally associated to masculinity, which partially explains the fact that men, especially those in contexts of social exclusion, are associated more frequently to criminality and violence. The narco-narratives reinforce the association between men and violence, by representing male characters as naturally inclined to drug dealing and quite comfortable in a criminal environment.

Even if masculinities cannot be reduced to "binary forms that suppose the division between hegemonic and subordinated forms", as Medrado and Lyra (2008, p. 824) affirm, the model proposed by Michael S. Kimmel (1998) helps us to consider the emergence of an ideal of masculinity in the first half of the nineteenth century that, as it constituted itself as hegemonic, devalued other male identities. Thus, hegemonic and subaltern ideas of masculinity develop mutually and simultaneously:

In the first part of the nineteenth century [...] a new version of masculinity emerged, that of the Self-Made Man. His masculinity would be demonstrated and tested in the market. He was an urban entrepreneur, a businessman, an *homme d'affaires*. [...] This definition of masculinity was inherently unstable, requiring constant proof, and always included the risk of failure. The masculinity should be proven, and as soon as it is proved, it is questioned again and should be proven once again; the search for constant, long-lasting, unattainable proof, finally becomes a search so devoid of meaning, that it assumes the characteristics of a sport, as Weber said (KIMMEL, 1998, p. 111).

The male characters linked to narcotrafficking in our season largely assume this ideal of the *self-made man*, even if applied to illicit businesses, because they are constructed as successful men who are never satisfied with what they have achieved until that time. In reality, this is the theme of the entire conflict of the season, given that it begins with the *narcos* rebelling against the decision of their boss, Gilberto Rodríguez, to terminate the cartel activities and engage in less risky and possibly more profitable legal businesses.

Thus, aggressivity and success in the market combine in *Narcos* in the construction of male characters identified above all with hegemonic masculinity, even if this appears in combination with other types of masculinity, such as the good father, the good husband, and an honorable police officer. It is in the relationship with this hegemonic masculinity that the female characters of *Narcos* are constructed.

In relation to the first two seasons of *Narcos*, the third season lacks the strong presence of a family, like Pablo's. The family as a space identified with a woman, is usually completed with female characters, such as Tata (Paulina Gaitan) and Hermilda (Paulina García) in the first two seasons, Escobar's wife and mother. In the third season there are some families, but they do not have the importance of Escobar's family and most are not as united by strong ties of affection, as is his. The bond in the families in the third season is in reality more material than emotional.

The three wives of the head boss of the Cali Cartel, Gilberto Rodríguez, appear briefly in only one episode and do not have names (for which reason we cannot credit the actresses). They are in the series to help characterize Gilberto as someone meticulous and skilled, who is capable of coordinating people and organizing routines, both at home and in business, so that everyone collaborates and acts towards the same objective. Without autonomy, these wives are inserted in the series to help characterize the male character. To have three wives is presented as a virtue of Gilberto, and the series lets it be understood that all men should fantasize being in this situation, even if only the most successful can achieve it. The wives share the attention of the husband on specific days of the week, and on Sunday they all join him to accompany football. It is an agreement that seems to function both for Gilberto and for the other wives, who happily accept, as the series suggests, because it allows them to maintain a life of luxury. It therefore involves, "kept" women, who are seen doing each other's nails, going shopping, drinking champagne and having sex with Gilberto. The sex, in this case, is performatized to give pleasure to Gilberto, and not necessarily to the wife, given that it involves a scene of *felatio*. At no time is a professional activity involving one of the wives mentioned; to the contrary, there is an ostensive emphasis on leisure. We do not even know which of them is the mother of Gilberto's son, who is a lawyer, who appears at various times in the series as a reasonable character with an education, who gives good advice to his father. Thus, Gilberto's wives are shown, even if briefly, as more immature and childish than his young son.

A second family nucleus composed of a kept woman is that of Miguel, Gilberto's brother, the second person in the Cartel hierarchy, but who is less intelligent, not a skilled administrator and is more impulsive. María Salazar (Andrea Londo), Miguel's girlfriend, begins the third season as the wife of Cláudio, a narco-trafficker who is a member of the Salazar family, of the North Valley Cartel. María is beautiful according to the conventional beauty standards of patriarchy; she dresses in tight clothing, and has an angelic rounded and photogenic face, which confers the character a mix of sensuality and innocence (in her first appearance she is using a tight and short dress, but white and in a fine fabric). The series presents her as a trophy-wife, who is part of the luxury consumption items of a kingpin, although her clothing, hair and makeup seek to balance vulgarity and elegance. Her first husband is brutally murdered in revenge, right in the first episode, by Pacho Herrera, a partner of the Rodríguez brothers and one of the main characters in the third season. After spending the entire second episode looking for her husband, she discovers that he is dead. In the third episode, María realizes that she needs a new man to protect her, which involves paying her expenses and those of her son and maintaining her standard of living. Living with her mother-in-law does not seem to be an option, since she is presented as a quarrelsome and sexist woman. María accepts the protection of Miguel Rodríguez, with whom she had flirted discretely in the first episode of the season, and becomes his companion. Miguel has no political skills, and he is also unable to conquer a woman by seduction. The relationship between he and María begins in an ostensibly cold and uncomfortable manner, as if he had purchased a wife, but then did not know what to do with her.

The agreement between the two, however, is quite clear and is represented as convenient for both, although there is no passion between them. There is respect and a certain mutual affection as the relationship develops, but Miguel, when he finds himself in danger, begins to shout and become annoyed by her. As the series suggests, Miguel wants a trophy-wife, while María wants to maintain her standard of living and give comfort and protection to her son. Miguel seems to relate with a body and María with the luxury and tranquility that the agreement offers, because the series emphasizes certain frivolous aspects of her daily life. In one sequence, after sex, Miguel gets up to resolve something important while María opens a makeup kit and looks in the mirror. In this way, what is suggested in *Narcos* is that María is, like others, a woman who associates to drug dealers to enjoy a high standard of living. The fact that she really does not have a choice, in the context of the plot, except to subject her body to powerful and violent men like Miguel, since she has a young son and she needs to survive, is barely emphasized. Through María, the series can portray the enormous impact of drug dealing, violence, the threat of poverty and police repression on the lives of women, given that caring for others, a culturally female task, becomes even more difficult in this context. Even if *Narcos* provides us elements to understand María's choice as a need to survive, this reading is to a certain degree impeded by other characteristics attributed to the character, including her fast adaptation to her new husband, which includes sex scenes constructed to appear pleasurable for both.

The relationship between María and Miguel reproduces some of the common places of representation of male and female sexualities: sexual desire is here a male attribute. María is sexy, gets dressed up and keeps herself pretty, but she is clearly an object that seeks to stimulate a man's

eye, which is the part of the couple that has effective desire. The brief scene in which she looks in the mirror after having sex makes clear that – since at this time there is no one to see here except herself – her objectification is something introjected, and in this sense a “natural” female attribute that the series reproduces without questioning. Maria knows so clearly that she is an object of the gaze, that she takes upon herself the task of caring for her own objectification, as described by John Berger (2008) in *Ways of Seeing*: to the degree to which she knows she is continuously seen by the gaze of others, a woman is always accompanied by her own image, which she herself then comes to control. We will have to return to Maria at the end of this text, because she protagonizes a fine scene of personal revenge and material survival. For now, we continue with the families.

A third family without strong ties of affection is that of the accountant of the Cali Cartel Guillermo Pallomari and his wife Patricia (Lina Castrillón). Here, once again, there is an incompatibility in the couple: Guillermo is crazy about Patricia, but she visibly disdains him. At the end of the season we know that she has a lover, who takes US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents to find Pallomari before the traffickers kill him for being an informant. Unlike the women in the other families, Patricia is not a kept woman, but works and has her own company. This allows her to make plans for her life that do not include her husband, and she even thinks of leaving him. Although she is presented as a successful businesswoman, on two occasions, when facing danger, her superficiality overcomes her intelligence: when Jorge Salcedo transfers her family from home for its protection (although it is a good apartment, not luxurious, but suitable) Patricia complains, and when the DEA offers the couple the opportunity to enter a witness protection program in the United States. In this sense, Patricia complements the characterization of Guillermo Pallomari as a snobbish and selfish person to the degree that he also takes time to accept giving up his life of luxury in Colombia, despite the risk to the lives of his family. Therefore, although both have responsible jobs – as an accountant for the cartel he is responsible for all the bribes – they are not presented as very astute people. Patricia’s lover supports this characterization, as he is presented largely as an idiot who is so naïve that he risks negotiating with the cartel and winds up with the bones in his hand broken. In this sense, it is not surprising to the viewer that Patricia has a lover, because the disdain she has for her husband is quite evident, but it is surprising that she fell for someone so dumb, perhaps even less interesting than her husband. The character of her lover, therefore, supports the characterization of Patricia.

A fourth family, perhaps that which has the most narrative importance and whose emotional ties are real, is that of Jorge Salcedo and his wife Paola (Taliana Vargas). Jorge Salcedo is one of the key figures in the third season and is responsible for dismantling the Cali Cartel. He is in charge of Miguel Rodríguez’s security staff, and finds himself in a complicated situation: he does not identify with the world of crime and wants to form his own company, but is not able to escape Miguel’s requests – which are not precisely requests, but poorly disguised impositions – for him to continue his job. At the same time, with the DEA agents following the cartel, Miguel and his son David become increasingly paranoid and violent. Salcedo knows that he must leave the cartel and realizes that the only escape is to collaborate with Miguel’s arrest. Jorge Salcedo’s wife, Paola, is described as a competent attorney, the “star” of her office, and has plans well on the way to open a private security company with her husband. Even if she is the most nuanced female character in the series, with whose life many of the female viewers can identify, her first appearance is in the background and completely out of focus for a few seconds, while her husband is in focus in the foreground. On a formal level, the framing anticipates what will occur during the episodes: Paola’s professional project will remain in the background in relation to the trajectory of her husband and she must act in response to his decisions. It becomes impossible for the couple to open the security company because Salcedo is not able to free himself from the Cali Cartel, which results in constant tensions within the couple. Paola dresses properly for her personal and professional status, with female suits at work and long and flowery dresses at leisure, and at no time is characterized as frivolous or unintelligent. She is shown going to work, but also performing motherly functions, which occurs infrequently with the other women in the series. The two aspects of capitalist social reproduction (the production of goods and services and the production of life) are seen here as perfectly reconcilable. In reality, Paola and Jorge are the only parents seen in routines of care with their children. We know that Maria has a son, but she is not seen putting him to bed, taking him to school or telling him stories. This also does not occur with Guillermo and Patricia. This leads us to conclude that, in the series, the mothers who are closest to narco-trafficking are represented as the worst mothers, perhaps because they are more concerned with issues considered frivolous, such as ostentation and luxury consumption items. Maternity, therefore, is treated here as linked to morality, in such a way that the “best” wives also appear to be the “best” mothers. Whether as a good professional or as a good mother, Paola’s characteristics complement the construction of the character of Jorge Salcedo (as occurred between Patricia and Guillermo): he is a simple man, professionally competent, who is not interested in ostentation, and who does not identify with narco-trafficking.

As in the first two seasons of *Narcos*, the third season also places in scene the figure of the *gringa* who does not fit into Colombian society. First it was Connie Murph (Joanna Christie), wife of the DEA agent Steve Murph, who is not able to adapt to Bogotá. Now we have Christina Jurado (Kerry Bishé), from the US, wife of Franklin Jurado, who handles the bank accounts linked to the Cali Cartel. Christina, like Connie, is incapable of learning to speak Spanish and finding a job (although the series mentions that she has a degree from Harvard). As a US citizen, it is easy for her to open accounts in fiscal paradises, something that is useful to the work of her husband. She wears elegant clothes and is discrete, without the vulgar ostentation that characterizes some of the Colombian women linked to narco-trafficking in the series. Bored and alone in Colombia, she uses drugs.

Christina's loneliness causes her to be seen as an easy target for seduction by the DEA agent Javier Peña, which winds up not taking place. Although she is convinced to collaborate with the DEA, she does not do so because of the agent's charm, but to protect her husband. The fact that Peña is not able to get her into bed is a relief, considering the agent's ability to seduce women. This leads us to another group of female characters, that is quite small but important in terms of construction of the image of women, which are those who are in the series to be seduced by Peña.

Javier Peña is played by Pedro Pascal, a handsome Chilean actor who in the series is characterized as an incurable seducer who is left incapacitated by his romantic relationships. The first sequence of the second season shows him at a wedding celebration in Texas, where Javier is with his father. He approaches a woman and asks to be forgiven for something he did to her ten years earlier, to which she responds that she forgave him long ago and that she is even grateful for what happened, given that a marriage between the two would not have been happy. It is interesting to note that this first sequence, which takes place in the US, does not collaborate in any way to advance the narrative about the Cali Cartel, which is the subject of the season, and appears to have been introduced only to show Peña's inability to love. Nevertheless, during the series, and not only in this season, he seduces many women, whether work colleagues, informants, or simply women he looks at in a bar. Not only is he handsome and seductive, but at times he need only sit at a bar and wait for a woman in the room to look at him. Peña's character is quite revealing of a certain image of women in the series: everything happens as if they are not able to resist certain men, particularly those who will hurt them. In some way, it is as if the women are held responsible for looking for men incapable of establishing an emotional relationship.

Although Peña is characterized as an irresistible lady killer, there is a woman, a bit older than the other characters, with a small but interesting role, who does not establish any romantic connection with any man, and who is in the series strictly because of her professional activity: this is Carolina Alvarez (Margarita Rosa de Francisco), an investigative journalist who examines crimes linked to the Cali Cartel. At the beginning of the season, she seeks out Peña to be her informant inside the DEA, and viewers familiar with *Narcos* may infer that sexual favors are included in the proposal. Fortunately, the relationship between Peña and Carolina is only professional. They work together to prove that the Cali Cartel has relations with the Presidency of the Republic. However, Peña is the protagonist, and we see him in action to reach these conclusions, while Carolina's investigative work is not shown.

Contrary to the Medellín Cartel, led by Pablo Escobar, the Cali Cartel is described in the third season as a place of elegant, discrete and refined men. In relation to Escobar's group, they are men who, as we mentioned, express a masculinity that is less rough, more sophisticated and a bit more diverse, even in the realm of hegemonic masculinity. Beyond the brothers Gilberto and Miguel, the cartel is composed of Chepe Santacruz and Pacho Herrera. The latter is an openly gay man, and his homosexuality is not a problem for his partners and for his work in general. The series shows him as a well-dressed and extremely violent man. He is responsible for the murder of María's first husband, who he killed brutally by tying each of his arms and legs to a different motorcycle and dismembering him. At the end of the season he conducts another massacre, killing all the members of the Salazar family. The association between homosexuality and violence requires more time to be analyzed, but it is possible to consider that in the series there is an implicit association between two "deviations from normality": the character who refuses heteronormativity is also the one who stands out in terms of psychopathy. One of Pacho's sexual partners is a young black man without a name, an employee of the Cartel, and with whom he establishes a relationship of clear inequality.

In this same sense, another theme that could be better developed in future studies is the subalternity of black and Amerindian male characters in *Narcos* in general. In the third season we have few racialized men (or women) represented, particularly if we consider that this is a Latin American series that takes place in Colombia, a country with a colonial and slavocratic past. Thus, combining the sadism in the representation of the gay character and the sub-representation of blacks and Amer-Indians, we see that we have a season that is not only guided by male characters, but by heterosexual white male characters, who are represented, whether as heroes or villains, as models closer to the ideal of masculinity.

On the other hand, the season inverts some expectations related to women and violence, particularly if we consider that in the first two seasons the women were more complicit with the

violence, but less active. This calls our attention to the fact that cultural products, even the most unidimensional ones, do not completely eliminate the opportunity for a counter-reading and any glimpse of an image of resistance by those who are under-represented. The final massacre, orchestrated by Pacho, only functions because two youths use their apparent innocence to icily murder the guards who protect the entrance of the Salazar family property. More interestingly, and we will now return to Maria to conclude our analysis, is her decisive action at the end of the season, undertaking an action that is simultaneously personal revenge, and a strategic move fundamental to dismantling the Cali Cartel.

In the final episode of the third season Miguel is arrested and Maria is left without a man to protect her, which leads her to seek the help of Miguel's son, David Rodríguez. David is characterized during the entire season as the main villain of the story, because he is aggressive, cold, ambitious, violent and he creates the main obstacles to a happy ending for the season. Maintaining the vile standards of this character, David humiliates her and says that he does not care about Maria, even if his father did (Miguel had given him explicit instructions to guarantee her well-being) and David recommends: "open your legs to someone else, because you are very good at that".

The *mise-en-scène* is carefully constructed, with only Maria in focus; she has an expression of deep anger, and four men are framing her, to establish a situation of unequivocal power. The presence of other men who witness the scene emphasize the humiliation suffered by Maria, and we can foresee, if not effectively note, the smiles that reveal the satisfaction of seeing a woman belittled. The framing simultaneously exacerbates the enormous asymmetry: she is alone, and has to negotiate with a powerful kingpin circled by various hitmen. The visual dynamic of the frame can be noted, which reveals Maria as an object of the gaze of the men present, a spectacle for sadistic male pleasure, and the look of the character herself, who at this moment has no power. The trophy-wife, who all narco-traffickers want to include in the list of their luxury objects, quickly becomes an object of disdain, and is now a "whore" or "bitch" who is no longer useful.

Maria does not take long to get revenge, because she knows how to make quite practical use of her condition. Minutes later, in the same episode, she appears at the house of Orlando Salazar, from the North Valley Cartel, the brother of her first husband, to ask for protection. Orlando asks her what she has to offer in exchange for protection, and the sequence ends without a response, leaving the viewer with the sense that Maria may have offered sexual-romantic favors once again. Ten minutes later, in the same episode, enough time for other events to have viewers forget the issue of Maria, David Rodríguez leaves his hideout with his gunmen and is killed by members of the North Valley Cartel. What Maria had offered was the location of the son of Miguel Rodríguez, which guaranteed both personal revenge and a place of protection in a new context of narco-trafficking. The fact that Maria's revelation took place out of scene is important to create the surprise of David's death, and it is up to the spectator to recreate the immediately preceding events to understand the role of the character in the action. Moreover, not showing Maria ratting on David preserves her character, who for viewers maintains the appearance of passivity and ingenuity while condemning her stepson to death.

In a series whose theme – narco-trafficking – commonly involves a traditionally male universe, whose characters, heroes and anti-heroes, are nearly all men, Maria's action is important, because it subverts the passivity associated to the female gender, even if it refers to a typically male gesture within narco-narratives: violent revenge. The female characters of *Narcos* are largely submissive towards men, whether as well-behaved and understanding lovers, wives or mothers. This effectively involves a symbolic universe in which male domination is nearly unbreakable. Maria, who had never performed any action of narrative importance in the series, comes to have fundamental influence in the final developments of the story because if David was alive, he would kill the accountant Guillermo Pallomari and prevent the judgement of the Cali Cartel in the US. This creates a possibility for female resistance within the patriarchal structure represented by the series, even if Maria's gesture is inevitably and ambiguously shaped by rules of this same structure, which she alone does not have the power to change. Although there are limits to female resistance, Maria moves very well within a world dominated by men, surviving as she can amid the violence of narco-trafficking, alternating between the passivity expected of a submissive wife and effective action when she enters survival mode.

In this sense, until revealing David's location, Maria's entire trajectory in the third season of *Narcos* refers to what Bourdieu would call "the weapons of the weak" in the work *Masculine Domination*, that is, the weapons available to those who are submitted to the male universe, such as seduction, for example, which "inasmuch as it is based on a form of recognition of domination, tends to reinforce the established relation of symbolic domination" (2002, p. 59). Bourdieu shows us that seduction as a weapon has a logic and effectiveness in a society in which the female body continues, even after so many decades of the feminist struggle, to be "subordinated to the male point of view" (2002, p. 29). The weapons of the weak, for Bourdieu, wind up corroborating the stereotypes of the female genre: Maria's only option is to identify with her role as trophy-wife, that which pertains to her in a macho, violent and unequal environment, in which poor ambitious men

become cruel bandits and poor beautiful women become their lovers. For this reason, she is called a whore and bitch at other moments of the series, always remaining silent before the offenses and transforming this into survival in an environment in which power rapidly changes hands. When she decides to take revenge on David, Maria changes her weapon, leaving aside seduction and becoming master of another type of power, a more practical, objective and effective one, and which has the ability to change the state of forces in the male universe.

When writing about *Lost Highway* (2017), by David Lynch, Slavoj Žižek (2009) analyzes women in the noir genre, and their return in the 1980s and 90s through neo noir films, of which *The Last Seduction* (1994) and *Body Heat* (1981) are examples. According to Žižek, noir films of the 1940s and '50s, express a male fantasy of the *femme fatale*, the attractive, manipulative, and sexually active woman who eventually must be punished, so that the fantasy remains controlled, and the reality protected from her actions. Neo noir, to the contrary, allows "the *femme fatale* to triumph and reduces her partners to fools condemned to death" (2009, p. 129). She "subverts the male fantasy precisely by concretizing it in a direct and brutal manner, by transferring it to 'real life'" (2009, p. 130-131). In *Narcos*, we are far from the *noir* and *neo noir* genres, while close to the police genre, but we can approximate Maria's action to Žižek's analysis in the sense that it involves the extrapolation of certain male fantasies about the sexually desired and simultaneously disdained trophy-wife, because she is considered mere merchandise that lives to sell her body to the survivor. For this reason the trophy-wife must remain controlled, bought and dominated, given that the ties that link her to her men are purely material. By ratting on David, Maria goes beyond the fantasy that keeps her symbolically controlled, selling the best she has at the time: not her body, but information. Maria as a trophy-wife represents the fantasy of a beautiful and passive woman, who does not question the intentions of her man. But the Maria who emerges from the reality is capable of coldly planning the assassination of a man when she sees her living conditions threatened.

In the universe of *Narcos* populated by kept-women, foreign misfit women, bodies that are supports for male seduction, superficial wives and some competent professionals, we have a group of representations that, in general, does not seem to us to make fair use of the female contribution to society. Despite the "good taste" aesthetic, contemplated for contemporary international viewers, consumers of streaming platforms, who are demanding in relation to editing and art direction, *Narcos* is not able to distance itself from the patriarchal heteronormativity that permeates the narco-narratives. This leads us to the question addressed at the beginning of this text: even if products such as *Narcos* seek to counter the aesthetic considered to be female of the Latin American television series – the telenovela – as well as the products aimed at less sophisticated men who enjoy scenes of abuse and violence linked to criminality, they are much less "universal" than they intend. They may even be much more sexist than a telenovela, considering that the protagonism is strongly male-oriented and the most traditional female stereotypes are reproduced, while the form and aesthetic are constructed to appear elegant and universal.

Nevertheless, Maria's sequence of revenge suggests to us that mass culture is, in both form and content, multidimensional, complex, with many opportunities for analysis, which we must be open to consider. Those who are subalternized can emerge from unexpected places, precisely from those characters, like Maria – who appear more helpless, less dangerous and more compliant. Maria uses passivity as a mask. The men – particularly David and his hit men – are not able to see through her, since they are limited to the apparent stereotype of the trophy-wife, and they die because they are unable to see the danger that is hidden behind the woman whom they objectify. As Fredric Jameson (1994) affirms, "works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly Utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated." (1979, p. 144).⁶

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HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE ACCORDING TO THE JOURNAL'S NORMS

JORGE, Marina Soler. "Mulheres em um mundo de homens: representação feminina em Narcos e a ilusão da ficção seriada 'universal'". *Revista Estudos Feministas*, Florianópolis, v. 29, n. 1, e67486, 2021.

AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTION

This article was translated from the original Portuguese by Jeffrey Hoff – jeffhoff@floripa.com.br.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Grant #2018/09435-3, São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP).

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Not applicable.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

Not applicable.

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BACKGROUND

Received on 09/09/2019
Revised on 14/04/2020
Revised on 06/07/2020
Accepted on 17/07/2020

